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# Review of *Women Writers of the American West, 1833-1927* by Nina Baym

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*Women Writers of the American West, 1833–1927.* By Nina Baym. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011. 371 pp. Bibliography, index. \$40.00.

The Great Plains, particularly in pioneer times, has been described as a place that was good for men and dogs but hell on women and horses, a notion that could be extended to the American West as a whole. In other words, the West was a man's country, initially explored by men, settled by men, written about by men. Nina Baym, however, well documents the inaccuracy of this last point in *Women Writers of the American West*.

Following an introductory chapter, nine chapters divide the West into nine geographic regions, each of these offering brief descriptions of the hundreds of books about the West written by western women. In the penultimate chapter, on travel books, Baym notes that most "women's western books were about the place, not getting to it." The final chapter comprises brief biographical notes on each of the 343 women whose 640 books are discussed in the preceding chapters.

The earliest book written by a woman about the West, and thus the starting point for Baym's study, was Mary Austin Holley's *Notes on Texas*, published in 1833. The arbitrarily chosen but reasonable ending point is 1927, the year Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* appeared in print. In the first chapter Baym clarifies her methods and criteria. What, for instance, constitutes a book, and where is the West? The former can range in size from a pamphlet to a tome, but must always be a discrete publication. St. Louis might call itself the Gateway to the West, but for Baym the western states run from Texas north to North Dakota and west to the Pacific Ocean.

I have no quarrel with her overall definition of the West, but considering Idaho part of the High Plains (along with Montana and Wyoming) seems incongruous to me. Why not have a category for mountain states, into which all three would fit both geographically and thematically? Or perhaps add Idaho to Utah, which has its own chapter?

In Baym's definition, the Great Plains begins in Oklahoma (which is joined in a chapter with Texas) and continues through Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas, ending (at least for the purposes of her book) at the Canadian border. The four states included in the chapter on the Great Plains were significant in the homesteading movement following the Civil War, and women writers there, according to Baym, "saw the region as. . .the heart of the true West. Their work told of failure repeatedly averted by women's pioneer tenacity."

The specialized topic of this readable book will limit its appeal for the general reader, but its content, which includes thorough bibliographies of primary and secondary sources, will give it a welcome home in the libraries of those with an interest in regionalism, women's studies, popular culture, and western history in general. There is material here that can keep scholars and their students busy for years. As Baym says, "I'm opening up a subject, not saying the last word about it."

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